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UNFRIENDLY FRIENDSHIPS

BULLYING AND FRIENDSHIP ISSUES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

REACHOUT AUSTRALIA

ReachOut is the most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents in Australia. Its trusted self-help information, peer-support program and referral tools save lives by helping young people to be well and stay well. The information it offers parents makes it easier for them to help their teenagers, too. ReachOut has been championing wider access to mental health support since it launched its online service more than 20 years ago. Everything it creates is based on the latest evidence and is designed with experts, and young people or their parents. That's why ReachOut is a trusted, relevant service that's so easy to use. Accessed by more than 2 million people in Australia each year, ReachOut is a free service that's available anytime and pretty much anywhere.

We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise connection to Country as being integral to health and wellbeing.

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CALLUM'S STORY

In Year 10 I had a rough time fitting in. I had a pretty huge falling out with someone I'd considered to be my best friend. It all started when Emily* got her first boyfriend. At school he would sit with us during breaks and pick on me. I'm talking serious stuff here. He'd take my phone and wallet. He'd push me around and call me horrible names. I was hoping Emily would stick up for me, but she never did. She just let it happen.

I thought about saying something to her, but there didn't seem any use. She was too focused on not upsetting her new boyfriend. Then, after several weeks, she started treating me really badly as well. She would call me names, and tell me I was stupid or overweight. She told me no one liked me, and that I was lucky to have her. One day she pushed me down the stairs and my phone got smashed. I was really shocked and hurt that she turned on me like that. I thought we were friends.

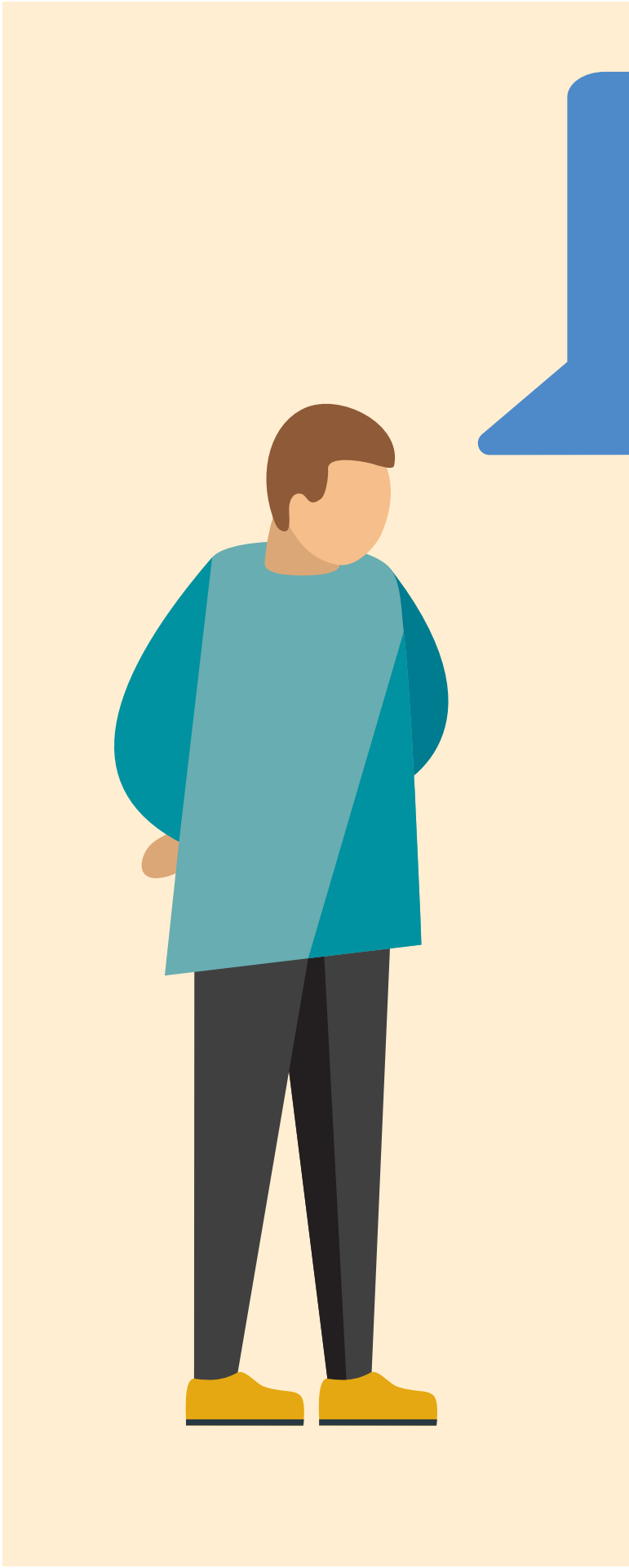
So, I started avoiding her because I didn't want to get picked on. But then she got really angry at me because I was avoiding her. I mean, could you blame me? She made me feel like shit. She couldn't understand why I didn't want to see her. She even started threatening me, saying she'd make up rumours about me and tell everyone. She threatened me so much that I got scared – scared of my so-called best friend. It all went downhill from there. The school was no help. They didn't care – and what could they do? My mind went to a pretty dark place at this time.

Looking back, I wish I'd known how to talk to Emily about it and find out why she was acting that way. I wish that other people had seen that something was wrong, so that it could have been sorted out at the beginning. Even more, I wish I'd had the confidence to call her out.

I think a lot of young people feel scared to talk to their friends when things go wrong and a friendship is no longer happy and mutual. Friendships aren't easy! There really needs to be more support for us to deal with friendship problems. I don't want anyone else to have to go through what I did.

Callum, 21, Sydney

* Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the individual.



It all started when Emily got her first boyfriend... He'd push me around and call me horrible names. I was hoping Emily would stick up for me, but she never did. She just let it happen.

INTRODUCTION

Friendships are incredibly important at any time of life. They shape who we are and how we make sense of our world.

In adolescence, though, friendships are particularly important, as they provide young people with a sense of belonging,[1] as well as with opportunities to increase their self-esteem, and develop problem-solving and social skills.[2] Strong friendships are also integral to positive mental health, acting as a protective factor against stressors and helping to maintain wellbeing,[3,4] strengthen resilience[5] and even deflect the impact of victimisation by peers.[6] However, friendship dynamics are complex, and there are times when friendships can be volatile, confusing and stressful. For young people, being bullied or treated badly by friends can cause considerable emotional distress.[7,8]

Whether bullying comes from a peer or a friend, it's widely acknowledged that it is a public health concern and is associated with both immediate[9] and long-term negative mental health outcomes.[10] Tragically, we are reminded that bullying is associated with suicide and can be fatal.[11]

A decade ago, research found that around one in four young Australians experience bullying.[12] Since then, despite significant investment in anti-bullying initiatives,[13] rates of bullying appear not to have changed dramatically. Research by ReachOut consistently indicates that around one in four young people have experienced bullying in the past year,[14,15,16] and a national study in 2015 reported that nearly one in three young people had been victimised by peers.[17] This leads us to question why, despite extensive research and efforts to combat bullying, we are no closer to reducing the devastating impact that bullying can have on young people and their families. Given its pervasiveness and serious impact on youth mental health, bullying has been a consistent focus area for research and service delivery at ReachOut. In recent years, we have observed that bullying and friendship issues often intersect, and that the language young people use when describing their experiences of bullying doesn't always align with definitions used by schools, researchers and policy makers.[18]

In order to develop relevant and meaningful resources to support young people, their parents/carers and educators to manage the burden of bullying, we set out to understand more about the lived experience of bullying and friendship issues.

Recommendations

This report will share ReachOut's research findings, along with evidence from academic literature, to support the following recommendations:

- Shift the focus from set definitions of bullying to specific behaviours to ensure we reveal the full scale and complexity of the issue.
- Review current approaches to bullying to take account of the social context in which the bullying takes place.
- Recognise that friendship issues can have a serious impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing, requiring a public health approach.
- Support all young people to build skills and confidence to navigate friendship issues to ensure they are able to benefit from the protective factors that positive, healthy friendships provide.
- Develop new resources to equip parents, carers and educators with the knowledge and tools to help young people navigate friendship issues.

'FRIENDSHIP ISSUES' DEFINED

In this report, the broad term 'friendship issues' refers to overt and covert incidents that happen between friends or within friend groups, such as arguments, teasing, belittling, excluding, spreading rumours or gossiping. These behaviours may or may not be intended to harm relationships or social standing. Academic research that has explored these behaviours uses a range of terms for these events, including 'social bullying'.[19] Emerging social–psychological research that has explored when these behaviours occur within friendships uses the term 'victimisation by friends'.[20] We use 'friendship issues' to distinguish these behaviours from 'bullying' (noting that the issues often overlap), and avoid using the language of 'victim', with which we found young people did not identify.

METHODS

ReachOut conducted a mixed-methods study in 2018 and 2019. The insights from that study have informed this report.

Online surveys

Two online surveys, each with representative samples of 1000 young people from across Australia, were conducted in December 2018 and May 2019. Participants were aged 14 to 25 years, and the sample was nationally representative for gender, and across metropolitan, regional, state and territory areas.

The December 2018 survey ('Bullying Survey') explored topics related to self-reported bullying experiences, including prevalence (based on a definition of bullying[21]), impact on emotional and mental wellbeing, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviour through quantitative and open-response questions.

The May 2019 survey ('Peer Behaviour Survey') explored the prevalence and impact of common behaviours associated with bullying, friendship issues and other peer issues (see Figure 1). The prevalence and impact of self-reported peer behaviours and the coping strategies employed by young people were also explored through quantitative and open response questions.

Exploratory Interviews

Semi-structured interviews ('Exploratory Interviews') were conducted in April 2019 with ten young people aged 15 and 16 years (five males, five females). One-hour face-to-face interviews were conducted in one metropolitan city (Sydney) and one regional town (Tamworth) in New South Wales. The interviews aimed to understand how young people articulate and conceptualise experiences of bullying and friendship issues. All participants had experienced a friendship and/or bullying issue that took place online (via social media, gaming or text messaging) in the past three months. Before the interview, participants completed a task involving the collation of images which represented experiences that had caused them to feel 'stressed, upset, angry or down' in the last three months, and listed three protective factors in their lives.

EVIDENCE

A large and complex problem

Our 2018 Bullying Survey found that one in four young people self-reported having been bullied in the past year (24.2%). The most common type of bullying was face-to-face bullying (61.5%), followed by social bullying (58.3%) and cyberbullying (31.8%). Many young people who were bullied experienced multiple kinds of bullying (39.3%), and both online and offline forms of bullying (68.0%) (See Appendix for definitions). Face-to-face bullying was most common among younger survey participants (14 to 16 years), while social bullying was more common among older participants.

'I don't feel confident anymore. I'm self-conscious about my weight and my body. I don't want to eat. I feel unhappy. I don't want to go out or socialise or see people. I want to be alone.'

(Male, 18, WA, Bullying Survey)

The survey also found that bullying has a severe impact on young people's wellbeing, with 63.2% of those who had experienced bullying rating the impact on their emotional and mental wellbeing as moderate to major. When asked to describe how the bullying impacted their wellbeing, young people reported a range of depressive symptoms, such as feeling sad, upset, worthless or withdrawn, and having low self-esteem.

'It made me feel sad and hurt, and [I] was wondering, "Why me? What is so bad about me?"'

(Male, 14, NSW, Bullying Survey)

Of the 24.2% of young people who identified as having been bullied in the past year, the majority sought some form of help. Over a third of young people (38.0%) accessed professional help sources, including mental health professionals, doctors, youth workers and online counsellors. Of those young people who sought help, a quarter (26.4%) went online for support (used search engines, mental health information websites, or online discussion forums) and 81.0% spoke to someone about their experience (a friend, parent, relative, partner or teacher).

Although a high number of those who identified as being bullied reported speaking to someone about their experience, the Exploratory Interviews indicate that young people may not always find this helpful. Some young people described feelings of powerlessness about their situation, even after talking to an adult. One young male recounted his experience at school, where he expressed frustration and hopelessness as the bullying continued over the years despite seeking help numerous times. As a result, he described feeling 'pushed to the edge' and ready to retaliate physically.

'The problem with that situation was the amount of times [over six years] I'd gone to teachers, and the amount of times those teachers had tried to do something about it, [but] nothing had changed. It really started to get to me. It's been bottled up for so long and no one's told me how else to [deal with it], you know? So, I was done. Last day of school, if he says absolutely anything, I'm gonna lose it. I told my mates that, and sure enough somehow he found out. I think my mates told him not to come to school for his own good. I think that it wouldn't have been a good situation if he had come to school that day.'

(Male, 15, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

The Exploratory Interviews also indicated that some young people would not consider asking for help until they reach a crisis point. One young female participant described how young people would likely respond to bullying by ignoring it and not telling anyone, until it got 'really bad'.

Other research suggests that young people may be reluctant to seek help for bullying, as they don't believe the situation will be handled effectively, or they feel ashamed and are unwilling to admit they are being bullied, or they believe things will get worse if they tell someone.[22]

In line with our research, other studies have found that not all young people find speaking to a parent or teacher helpful.[23,24] Of concern, recent Australian research has found that for young people who are severely bullied, telling an adult at school, compared to not telling, was associated with a higher chance of

‘Because it happens a lot, it’s a common thing, so if it’s little, you just brush it aside or you just keep it to yourself. But I think if it gets really bad, to the point where you just want to maybe kill yourself or something, then I think that’s when you might realise, “Oh, I think I have to talk to someone about this. This has to stop, because it’s going to affect me badly.”’

(Female, 16, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

the bullying continuing.[25] Further, when young people are not told about the actions that a teacher will take after confiding in them, this increases their feelings of powerlessness and anxiety.[26] However, it is important to note that some young people do find talking to someone helpful. In fact, the 2019 Mission Australia Youth Survey found that 34.4% of young people who reported being bullied believed that talking to close friends or family helped them to deal with the bullying,[27] even though telling an adult may not always lead to cessation of the bullying behaviours. Considering these factors and that bullying is an indicator of risk for the development of a range of mental health disorders in adolescence, including depression, anxiety and eating disorders,[28] it is imperative that parents, teachers and friends are adequately supported to help young people who come to them seeking help for bullying.

Bullying remains a significant public health concern for young Australians, despite ongoing investment in prevention and mental health initiatives. While help-seeking rates for bullying are relatively high, the Exploratory Interviews found that young people don’t always feel supported after speaking to someone about their experience. This indicates that the current support being offered to young people may not be meeting their needs. Taken together, this highlights the need for new approaches to prevent bullying and to support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people.

The problem with definitions

Our research indicates that current definitions of bullying do not always align with the lived experience of young people, and when used for measurement may underestimate the scale of the issue. Instead of asking young people whether they had experienced 'bullying' as per a definition,[29] the 2019 Peer Behaviour Survey asked if they had experienced a series of behaviours typically associated with bullying and peer issues (Figure 1). Almost half (46.3%) of the young people surveyed had experienced one of the bullying behaviours in the past month. This result is noteworthy, as it is considerably higher than the self-reported rate of bullying in the past year, as seen in the Bullying Survey (24.2%). The difference suggests that young people who have been bullied may not be conceptualising their experience as bullying.

Different bullying and peer behaviours impacted young people to varying degrees (see Figure 2). The most impactful behaviour experienced was being sent abusive or hurtful messages (typical of online bullying), with 73.8% of young people reporting a moderate to major impact on mental health and wellbeing. Interestingly, this was higher than the impact of physical bullying (71.1%). This result is particularly concerning, considering that twice as many young people indicated they have received abusive messages as reported having been physically bullied (Figure 1).

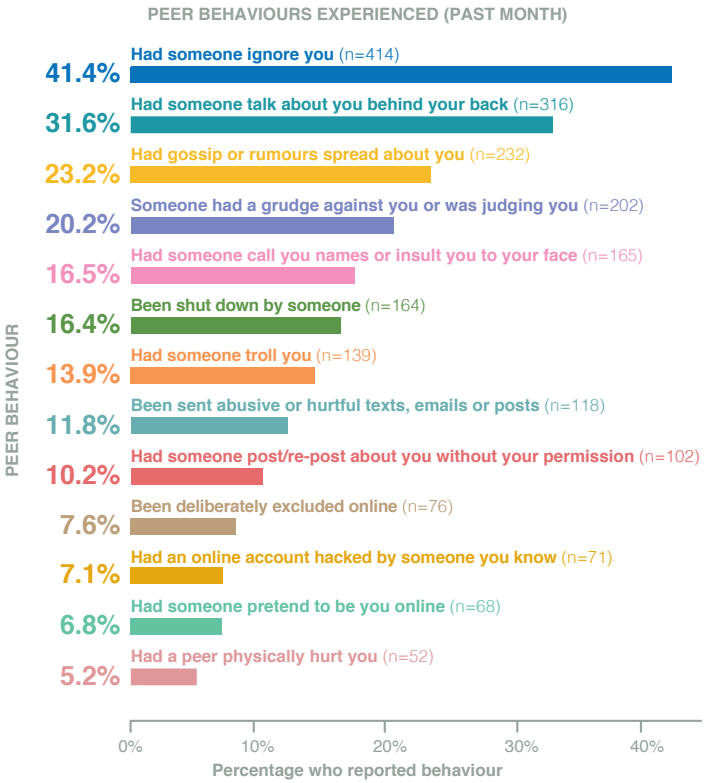


Figure 1.
Percentage of young people surveyed who experienced various peer behaviours (n=1000)

Source: 'Have you experienced any of the following in the past month?', Peer Behaviour Survey, 2019.

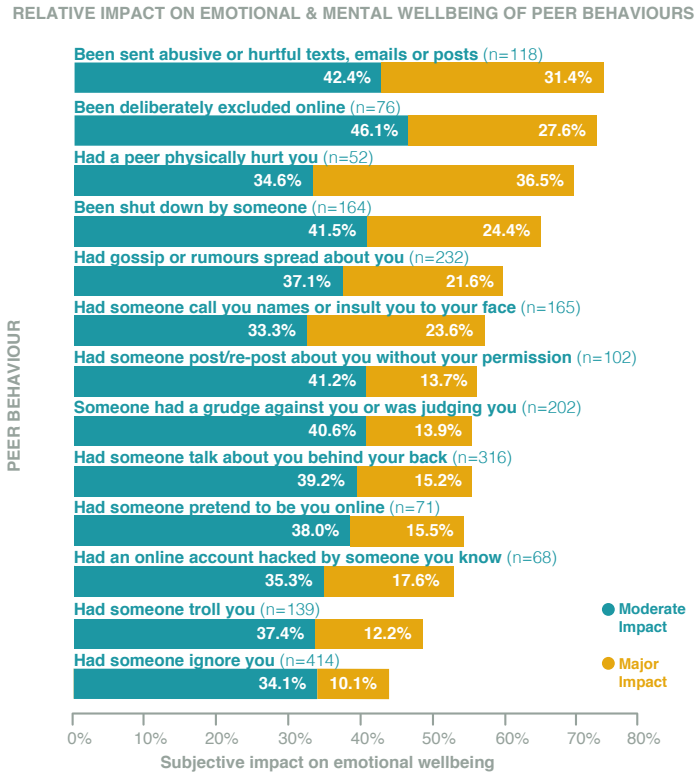


Figure 2.
Impact of behaviours on mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people surveyed (n=1000)

Source: 'Rate the extent to which these behaviours have impacted on your emotional and/or mental wellbeing', Peer Behaviour Survey, 2019.

The Exploratory Interviews also found that young people are more likely to report experiencing a behaviour of bullying, than to acknowledge or admit that they are being bullied. The interviews revealed that young people found it difficult to label their experiences as bullying, particularly when being subject to social bullying behaviours by a friend. Bullying and friendship issues were often found to be intertwined. For example, some participants in the Exploratory Interviews who identified as being bullied described behaviours within their friendship groups. Others told us they had only experienced friendship issues, despite describing behaviours from friends such as being deliberately ignored, excluded and having rumours spread about them. The young people who described repeated behaviours by their friends that left them feeling hurt often normalised and downplayed these upsetting and stressful behaviours as 'drama', 'miscommunications' and 'toxic friendships'.

'Yeah. I know it kind of is bullying, but I don't count it that much as bullying. It's just one of my friends, who's not really my friend anymore. She just kind of puts you down. Like, she'll make herself look better in front of a large group of people, and then she'll make you look dumb or like you're less than her. And it just makes you feel really bad.'

(Female, 16, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

The Exploratory Interviews found that common strategies for managing bullying can cause more distress within friendship groups. For example, talking to a trusted friend about the behaviour of another friend could be perceived as spreading rumours or gossip; while avoiding, ignoring or blocking a friend can cause more 'drama' and tension within a friendship group dynamic.

'We've had friendship drama on and off. This year one of our friends was telling us that we were affecting her mental health. Out of the blue, she's like: "You guys aren't really good, so I'm going to sit with other people." I think it was definitely confusing for us to be friends one day and then all of a sudden she's just like "Sorry." So yeah, it's awkward because we haven't talked about it. It's kind of just shoved under the rug and now we kind of ignore each other.'

(Female, 16, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING BULLYING

The following are examples of common strategies suggested to young people to manage bullying:

- Talk to someone about the bullying.
- Avoid the bully.
- Ignore the bully.
- If it's happening online, block and report the bully.

(Source: ReachOut.com)

In line with our findings, other research suggests that current approaches to bullying fail to reflect the complexity of adolescent social lives,[30,31] and that the use of language that labels young people as 'bullies' and 'victims' diminishes the many social factors at play.[32] Young people have been found to dismiss friendship conflict to downplay the impact on their emotional wellbeing in order to save face, rather than positioning themselves as a victim.[33] Qualitative research with adolescent girls in Ireland also identified a pattern of resistance to labelling cyberbullying behaviours that come from friends as bullying. Instead, they used softer language such as 'messing', 'slagging' or 'bitchy fights' to describe their friends' behaviour in order to downplay its severity.[34] While bullying definitions are helpful in a legal context and when comparing prevalence and impacts, labelling young people's experiences using set definitions can be problematic[35] and may prevent young people from getting help when they need it most.

Collectively, our findings and those from prior research indicate that while young people can experience multiple kinds of bullying, they may not always conceptualise their experience as bullying. When bullying happens within a friendship group, getting support can be particularly challenging as traditional strategies for coping with bullying are not always viable or easily implemented. Further, many young people who experience bullying often do not label their experiences as bullying, particularly if it happens within friendships. Taken together, this indicates that the true extent of bullying may be greater than has previously been estimated, and many young people may be unlikely to access or receive appropriate support, despite the significant toll it is taking on their wellbeing.

74.9%

of young people who had experienced a friendship issue reported that it had a moderate to major impact on their emotional and mental wellbeing

Friendship issues can be serious

While the mental health impacts of bullying are firmly established, the detrimental effects of friendship issues are not as well understood. The 2019 Peer Behaviour Survey revealed that one in three young people had experienced a friendship issue that caused them to feel stressed, anxious or down in the past month (33.5%). The survey also found that these issues happen often, with the majority of these young people reporting that the behaviours had occurred multiple times within the past month. Interestingly, when asked to specify the friendship issue, many young people described behaviours characteristic of social bullying – for example, being ignored (not responding to messages, being excluded from events), verbal and social humiliation (hurtful comments, being belittled in front of a group), having friends talk about them behind their back, and being lied to.

'A friend of mine goes about telling people I did something which I didn't do. It really hurt because he was supposed to be my best friend.'
(Male, 16, Peer Behaviour Survey)

'I wasn't invited to a party. It was for a friend in my group and everyone else in my group was invited. I don't know what I did wrong but it made me very sad… I stayed in my room for a few days. I didn't want to go anywhere because I was scared that people would make fun of me.'
(Male, 23, Peer Behaviour Survey)

Of those young people who had experienced a friendship issue, three-quarters (74.9%) reported that it had a moderate to major impact on their emotional and mental wellbeing. The Peer Behaviour Survey also found that other behaviours not typically associated with bullying can still have a substantial impact on young people's wellbeing. For example, being 'shut down' and having 'someone talk about you behind your back' were associated with moderate distress for young people. It is important to recognise the impact these behaviours have on the emotional health of young people, even when they may not align with technical definitions of bullying.

Findings from the Exploratory Interviews on the wellbeing impact of friendship issues shared many similarities with how bullying has been found to impact young people. For example, young people described having depressive symptoms, such as feeling sad, upset, withdrawn and having low-self esteem, when sharing how friendship issues made them feel. Being put down or belittled by friends left young people feeling worthless, hurt and upset, or targeted and isolated when they were belittled or teased in front of others. Young people reported feeling confused when hurtful behaviours came from someone they considered to be a close friend. Often, they wondered why they were being treated badly and sometimes doubted their self-worth.

'[My friends] don't say "shut up" to anyone else. I feel like I'm targeted, triggered. Then sometimes they can be really nice to me. So, it confuses me. I'm like, "Do you like me or do you not?"'
(Male, 15, Regional NSW, Exploratory Interviews)

Behaviours such as being ignored or shut out of conversations and events also left young people questioning whether they were liked, and sometimes led to excessive worry about how they were being perceived by their peers. Young people often spoke

about how their friendships could be quite turbulent, changing quickly from good to bad. This was especially distressing when the cause of the change was unknown.

'She's a nice friend. She would support you. She would comfort you. She was good in all aspects. It was just if you did something wrong that you didn't even know you did wrong to her, that was the line – you stepped [over] it. That was the end of it.'
(Female, 16, Regional NSW, Exploratory Interviews)

'Sometimes he'd be your best friend and he's on your side, but then he could turn against you at any point.'
(Male, 15, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

Recent research has found that having a close friend is more impactful on resilience than experiencing bullying. Having a good friend raised individual resilience scores by an average of four points, whereas being bullied was found to lower resilience scores by two points.[36] This finding highlights the importance of friendships during adolescence, and reinforces findings that conflict and instability within peer groups can be especially distressing.[37,38]

There is a lack of research on the prevalence and impact of friendship issues. The majority of studies conducted have focused specifically on overt friendship conflict or behaviours intended to victimise and don't encompass those not intended to hurt or that are ignored. In addition, much of the research on friendship behaviours has focused only on adolescent girls.

While friendships can offer significant benefits to wellbeing, our research has found that young people commonly experience behaviours from friends that leave them feeling stressed, worried and down. Friendship issues can have a considerable impact on young people's emotional health regardless of whether the behaviours experienced fit within formal classifications of bullying. Due to the incredibly important role that friendships play in young people's social and emotional development, helping young people to navigate friendship issues is an area that warrants attention.

Friendship issues are hard to manage

The Peer Behaviour Survey found similarities between the behaviours causing young people to feel stressed, worried and down and the strategies they used to deal with those experiences. Young people managing friendship issues often tried to distract themselves by talking to another person (e.g. a family member, other friends, partner), spending time with other friends, or doing activities they enjoyed. However, these same strategies could be perceived as spreading rumours and gossip, or ignoring or avoiding a friend.

Young people described finding it quite challenging to cope with friendship issues. A lack of skills and confidence to have difficult conversations with friends, and a belief that there was little they could do to address the friendship issue they were experiencing, were key themes that emerged from the Exploratory Interviews. Rather than discussing issues that arise with their friends, young people described feeling more comfortable ignoring or avoiding the offending friend, or talking to another trusted friend about the issue. These behaviours often left young people feeling shut out without explanation, confused, stressed, angry, sad or lonely.

'One of my best friends wouldn't talk to me or go near me for like two weeks. It was very awkward, the tension between us. She never replied when I messaged her, she would just keep a distance. I didn't know why [she wouldn't talk to me] until someone else told me.'

(Female, 16, Tamworth, Regional NSW, Exploratory Interviews)

'I would be scrolling through Instagram and I'd see them hanging out, having fun. But it's not like they asked and I wasn't free. They just never said anything about it. It made me feel very sad, lonely, because I didn't have many friends. I couldn't really talk about it to anyone, because everyone has other problems, and their problems are worse than mine. So, I just kind of keep them to myself, because [other] people have it worse.'

(Female, 16, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

Issues within friendship groups were described as being difficult to navigate. Young people said they felt scared to bring up issues with friends, due to concerns that they would be rejected from friendship groups or that it would lead to conflict or make the situation worse. As a result, young people often tried to ignore behaviours from friends that caused them distress, and/or they downplayed the impact. When young people left friendship issues unaddressed, this contributed to feelings of powerlessness, low self-worth and low confidence. One young male explained how he accepted he had to 'put up' with the behaviour from his friendship group:

'I knew that I was stuck with them. I would put up with whatever they did, because, realistically, trying to leave that [friendship] group would probably be the death of me. I didn't really have a backup group. I would just be on my own, and then it wouldn't end up well.'

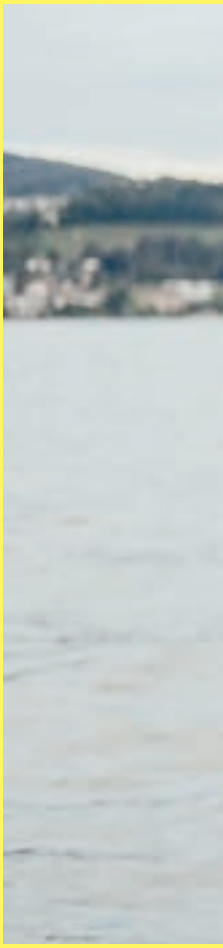
(Male, 15, Sydney, Exploratory Interviews)

External research supports the finding that young people tend to shy away from friendship conflict, particularly if there is a perceived risk of losing the friend as a consequence.[39] Studies have found that young people lack confidence to confront aggressive friends, to discuss conflict openly with friends, and to report incidents.[40] It has also been found that although young people may have knowledge about how to respond to friendship issues, many lack the confidence to implement these strategies.[41] Critical to bringing about behavioural action is addressing perceived barriers, benefits and threats while acknowledging personal and social factors to encourage action.[42,43]

Research has indicated that when young people maintain relationships with friends who mistreat them, this may prevent them from gaining the social skills and support that healthy friendships provide, and may increase the risk of establishing abusive relationships in adulthood.[44] Maltreatment from friends has been found to be associated with social difficulties, blaming problems on others rather than taking responsibility, and a reduced likelihood of sharing concerns with others and, instead, keeping feelings and issues to oneself.[45]

Taken together, this evidence indicates that young people can often feel powerless to address or manage issues with friends that leave them feeling stressed, worried or down. Our research indicates that when they lack the skills and tools to navigate distressing behaviours within friendships, young people often respond in ways that can perpetuate the problem. Our findings are in line with prior research which indicates that lack of confidence to address issues is a significant barrier preventing young people from maintaining healthy friendships. Without the confidence and skills to manage friendship issues, their relationships and mental health can be negatively impacted. Young people therefore need support that goes beyond information alone, to build confidence to have difficult conversations, and to ensure they develop important life skills that will help them to build and maintain healthy relationships into the future.

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH



The evidence from this research points to the need for a new approach to bullying that recognises the considerable impact that friendship issues have on young people's mental health and their need for appropriate support.

Shifting the approach to bullying

The current approach to bullying fails to adequately capture the complexity of the social context in which bullying plays out.[46,47,48] Definitions can be restrictive in the reality of dynamic social relationships,[49] and can lead some young people to feel that the harmful behaviours they experience are 'not serious enough' to warrant support. Further, even when a young person reaches out to a trusted adult, they may not find this helpful.[50] Common strategies suggested for managing bullying are not always viable or relevant in the context of friendships, and when implemented can cause more distress.

In line with other studies,[51] our research suggests that young people can dismiss unhealthy behaviours that don't meet particular criteria – for example, that behaviours must be deliberate, repeated and intentional. Young people can also struggle to label their friends as bullies, which can lead them to downplay the impact of the behaviours.[52,53] To encourage young people to seek support, the particular behaviours experienced and their impact on wellbeing should be the focus.

Additionally, in agreement with past research,[54,55] our findings suggest that young people may not conceptualise their experiences in the same way that researchers and policy makers do. Research and reporting on bullying that relies on young people self-reporting using set definitions may result in inaccurate data and continue to misrepresent the issue.[56] This research demonstrates the value of adopting a mixed-methods approach to exploring bullying in all its complexity, as qualitative methods alongside quantitative measurements can uncover both the scale and the complexity of this topic.

Recommendations

- Shift the focus from set definitions of bullying to specific behaviours to ensure we reveal the full scale and complexity of the issue.
- Review current approaches to bullying to take account of the social context in which the bullying takes place.

Supporting young people to build healthy friendships

The complex nature of adolescent friendships and the extent to which friendship issues can cause distress must be recognised. Our research indicates that many young people feel powerless to address friendship issues and would benefit from support aimed to help them develop the interpersonal skills and capabilities needed to foster respectful relationships and address hurtful behaviour within relationships, as well as to learn positive strategies for coping with distressing incidents. While there has been increased investment in bullying interventions, focus must be placed on supporting parents, carers and educators to help young people manage friendship issues.[57]

The importance of strong friendships in young people's lives cannot be overstated, particularly as friends play a role in supporting positive emotional and mental wellbeing.[58,59] Yet, friendships can have a darker side. We know that power imbalances will always exist within social groups, and that young people are likely to experience aggressive and hurtful behaviours from friends as well as peers. Skills for navigating behaviours that cause stress, worry and hurt are needed throughout adolescence and into adulthood. We must support young people to foster positive, safe and stable friendships, so that they are able to benefit from the compassion, trust, fun and sense of belonging that these important relationships provide.

Recommendations

- Recognise that friendship issues can have a serious impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing, requiring a public health approach.
- Support all young people to build skills and confidence to navigate friendship issues to ensure they are able to benefit from the protective factors that positive, healthy friendships provide.
- Develop new resources to equip parents, carers and educators with the knowledge and tools to help young people navigate friendship issues.

APPENDIX

Definition of bullying, as used in the 2018 Bullying Survey

There are three main types of bullying: face-to-face bullying, social bullying and cyberbullying.[60]

Face-to-face bullying

Verbal: includes name calling, insults, teasing, intimidation or verbal abuse.

Physical: includes hitting, kicking, tripping, pinching and pushing, or damaging personal property.

Social bullying

Aims to harm a person's social reputation and/or cause humiliation. Includes lying and spreading rumours, playing nasty jokes to embarrass and humiliate, mimicking unkindly, encouraging others to socially exclude someone, or damaging someone's social reputation.

Cyberbullying

Includes using social media, instant messaging, texts, websites and other online platforms to send abusive or hurtful texts, emails, or posts, images or videos; deliberately excluding others or spreading nasty gossip or rumours online; or imitating someone online or using their log-in.

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